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ABSTRACT

The views of 59 teachers at 11 further education (FE) colleges in five of England's nine regions were interviewed in depth regarding the factors that promote and prevent improvements in student retention and achievement. Those teachers who taught on teams with the highest retention and achievement focused on key elements of teaching and learning as being the most important factors associated with high retention and achievement. Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement tended to focus slightly more on factors they considered outside their control. The following were among the key elements of teaching and learning deemed most important to high retention and achievement: recruiting with integrity so that students are in the right course in the first place; well-trained, well-qualified teaching staff; well-prepared lessons; delivering curricula in an interesting way and enriching programs beyond the minimum; excellent communication between staff and students; and providing students with a lot of attention and care. Low retention and achievement was linked to the following factors: students' personal problems; students being in an inappropriate course; poor college facilities; poor learning environment; lack of management support; lack of resources; low morale; and recruitment of poor-quality students. The research methodology is appended. (Contains 16 references.)(MN)

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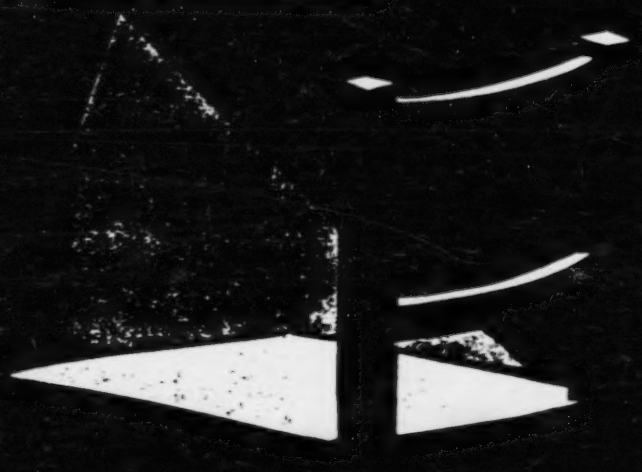

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Introduction

What do teachers think makes a difference to how their students succeed? In 2001, as part of a research project, 59 teachers gave their views. In courses where students were not doing so well, teachers tended to feel uninvolved in decision-making, felt problems were beyond their control and conveyed these negative feelings to students. In contrast, in courses where students' retention and achievement were high or improving, staff felt more in charge of their destiny. They took part in staff development and teamwork, were able to identify and support 'at risk' students, planned student-centred schemes of work, and used data and feedback effectively to plan improvements. The findings suggest that if colleges can encourage self-directed teams, and a readiness to value feedback, staff will be more likely to strive for improvements.

Research into accredited and Beacon colleges (Moorse and Reisenberger 2001) also suggests that a college culture which empowers teachers is critical to achieving and sustaining excellence. Colleges with such a culture focus on putting students at the heart of everything have high expectations of them and do everything they can to support student achievement. This can only be accomplished, however, if an institution has highly competent and qualified staff who are valued, rewarded, supported and developed. Staff also need to have ownership of decision-making for their course or area.

There were significant barriers to sustaining excellence where systems became increasingly bureaucratic or college cultures focused too much on the 'policing' side of quality: inspection, audit and justification.

There is plenty of other evidence which suggests that the largest improvements in learning are most strongly associated with interventions that impact directly on the experience of learners and where they learn – in classrooms, workshops and in workplaces (Wang, Haertel and Walberg 1993; Creemers 1994; Scheerens and Bosker 1997; Hattie 1999; Martinez 2001).

This backdrop provides the context and stimulation for this report which illuminates the position of teachers in colleges at the start of the 21st century.

The research

This report is based on findings that developed out of the methods inspired by John Gray and others, published as *Improving schools* (Gray *et al.* 1999). In this work, Gray employed a rigorously quantitative approach to identify a sample of schools which had improved at a variety of rates. The qualitative phase of Gray's research investigated, through interviews, the underlying reasons that appeared to account for the differential rates of improvement. Some of the hypotheses here are also based on earlier work on teachers' attitudes in further education (Martinez and Munday 1998, pp75–76; Martinez 2000). This work concludes that, in the main, teachers on programmes with relatively poor student outcomes in terms of retention and achievement tended to explain these in terms of factors beyond their control while teachers on courses with high retention and achievement attributed their results to their own agency. Dixon and Walker (2000) made similar inferences.

A major purpose of this research is to examine the impact of changes to teaching, tutoring and other factors. In so doing, it also extends the information available concerned with the field of college improvement. This is as a result of applying more quantitative research techniques (ie a questionnaire) to a structured sample of courses within colleges and conducting follow-up interviews with a representative sample of teachers to further explore the survey responses.

The specific objectives addressed in this report are to:

- identify factors which are most strongly associated with improvements to retention and achievement
- identify limiting factors which are most strongly associated with an absence of improvement or indeed with a deterioration in course performance
- investigate the factors which most strongly differentiate courses which are improving from courses which are not improving.

The first part of this project was a statistical analysis of questionnaires completed by staff on the following range of courses:

- **high baseline, improvement** courses that have a relatively high level of retention and achievement and continue to improve
- **high baseline, maintenance** courses that have a relatively high level of retention and achievement and are maintaining their level of performance
- **high baseline, decline** courses that have a relatively high level of retention and achievement but are now starting to deteriorate
- **low baseline, improvement** courses that have a relatively low level of retention and achievement but are starting to improve
- **low baseline, maintenance** courses that have a relatively low level of retention and achievement and are maintaining their level of performance
- **low baseline, decline** courses that have a relatively low level of retention and achievement and are starting to deteriorate.

High baseline means that the course had relatively high retention / achievement rates in 1996/97. Low baseline means the opposite. Improvement means that retention / achievement rates improved over the 3 academic years in the period 1997–2000. Maintenance means that retention / achievement rates stayed the same; decline means they deteriorated over that same period.

The second qualitative part of the project, on which the substance of the present report is based, consisted of detailed interviews with 59 staff who completed questionnaires (26% of those involved in the initial survey), in order to:

- investigate more fully the responses to the survey
- clarify and check some of the tentative conclusions drawn from the survey
- provide the opportunity for teachers to discuss, in a relatively open and unstructured way, their understanding of the factors affecting retention and achievement.

The report that follows draws on both the survey findings and the follow-up interviews, with the main focus on the qualitative research. An additional research report will include a detailed statistical analysis of responses to the survey (Martinez and Maynard 2002). For ease of reference, the report is structured around the categories of change factors used in the survey. A more detailed discussion of research methods can be found in the appendix and in Martinez and Maynard (2002).

The findings suggest that there are some significant differences in the ways that teachers on more and less successful programmes interpret the impact of various changes on student retention and achievement.

We also found some pronounced similarities concerning teachers' sense of pride and identity, as teachers, across all survey responses and interviews. In addition, we identified some pronounced differences in the way that teachers defined their approaches to teaching and to learners – hence the title of the report: *Pride or prejudice? College teachers' views on course performance.*

Overall findings

Teachers interviewed had strong views about which factors most affected retention and achievement and some contradictory views required further clarification. For example, teachers of courses with the highest retention and achievement often claimed negative factors were affecting them when, statistically, their retention and achievement figures had remained unchanged over the period in question. Conversely, teachers of courses with low retention and achievement often said that their students left because of economic or social circumstances, despite the fact that similar student cohorts could be found in the same college on courses with high retention and achievement.

When the interviews were completed and correlated, what emerged was that teachers of courses in the same range had remarkably similar attitudes and strategies towards retention and achievement. These attitudes are summarised below.

Teachers of courses with high retention and achievement:

- work in autonomous, self-monitoring teams with a strong commitment to teaching, learning and team values
- have complementary skills and a commitment to do their best for all their students
- respond positively to staff development and management processes which support teaching and learning
- recruit students with integrity
- have a relatively negative view of 16–19-year-old students' abilities, but make every effort to motivate, inspire and support them
- identify 'at risk' students as soon as possible and address students' literacy and numeracy needs at an early stage in the programme
- believe in the systematic preparation of student-centred schemes of work, which are interesting and stimulating and include a strong practical and / or enrichment element
- have high quality induction programmes and set student ground rules to promote positive and collaborative behaviour
- ensure that assessment is rigorous and that students have a clear understanding of assessment procedure / criteria. Assignments are scheduled, manageable and enable students to experience early success

- use tutorials to set targets, review progress, resolve personal problems and to praise students and show them that they are valued as individuals
- act on all data to improve the quality of their provision, but particularly value student feedback and the observation of teaching and learning
- value human resources as highly as any practical aids to teaching and can use their teaching skills to overcome poor resources and unsatisfactory learning environments
- ensure that student time at college is fully used and, where necessary, involves timetabled self-study.

Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement:

- tend to be complacent about their role and to assume that any changes are unnecessary or someone else's responsibility
- will either belong to a team where morale is low and there are elements of staleness and negativity or, conversely, will be in a strong, mutually supporting team who refuse to see any problems relating to retention and achievement or their professional practice
- see work-related problems as beyond their control
- recruit students without integrity and expect a high proportion to drop out (or persuade them to do so)
- tend to stereotype students by class, gender, race and ability
- suggest that they are unable to identify and support 'at risk' students, because they have no time to do so, lack expertise and see these roles as someone else's responsibility
- convey negative attitudes to students about the college, college managers and students' own lack of ability
- tend not to review the curriculum and may not even have key elements in place (eg scheme of work, team meetings, minutes of meetings)
- do not regard assessment and feedback as a high priority, but tend to blame students for their lack of ability and failure to produce assignment work on time
- are particularly negative about college quality systems and tend to see them as processes without purpose or systems for the sake of having a system
- blame management pressure and lack of time for their inability to plan lessons / support students adequately. Management is also blamed for poor resources and inadequate learning environments.

Teachers of courses where high retention and achievement are declining:

- experience one or more problems within the course team that leads to a lowering of morale (eg increased workloads, key members ill or absent, a general feeling of not being valued by line managers or senior managers)
- tend to believe that senior managers are reducing team numbers and replacing highly skilled full-time members with part-time staff who are not fully committed to the team ethos

- have a strong sense of isolation, lack of reward and a heavy workload
- move from a student-centred focus to a team-centred focus for self-justifying mutual support. This can lead to less focus on learners and their progress, and more discussion about individual / team powerlessness to alter things
- blame college managers for recruiting weak students who will inevitably leave the programme because their needs cannot be supported. A high percentage of these students are expected to drop out anyway
- become focused on their own personal problems to the extent that they have no time to support students or develop new tutorial systems to track student progress
- begin to make assumptions about how well students understand the course and its assessment procedures / criteria. Assessment tends to become less rigorous
- allow low morale to lead to a sense of powerlessness and lack of autonomy. Quality issues become peripheral to a growing sense that, as professionals, they are being mismanaged and made to feel (and sometimes look) incompetent in front of their students.

Teachers of courses where low retention and achievement and achievement are improving:

- develop a team philosophy and place greater emphasis on teaching and learning. They begin, with or without support, to implement improvements
- respond positively when senior managers offer staff development to assist changes to improve retention and achievement
- begin to plan more effectively by updating their programmes and adding enrichment. They actively benchmark against successful programmes elsewhere and seek the support of exam boards or external agencies
- begin to recruit with integrity and to analyse their student cohorts in order to identify barriers to learning and areas where students require additional / ongoing support
- develop more positive relationships with their students and / or develop group identities in order to motivate students and make them committed to the college and the group
- examine assessment strategies to make them more manageable and to promote student understanding of assessment criteria. Assignments are often reviewed and rewritten
- develop tutorial systems to review progress one-to-one. Teachers are also more willing to help students resolve personal problems
- tend not to see quality systems or resources as key elements in the improvement process.

Although teachers in each range of courses adopted different strategies which appear to affect on retention and achievement, we do not suggest the above are checklists or that one process can be isolated as being more effective than another. We do believe, however, that these behaviours indicate key ways in which teachers conceptualise their jobs. They also suggest that there are unwritten contracts between teachers and students and teachers and managers which play a significant part in the development of such behaviours.

Teachers, teams and management support

The quantitative part of the research gave teachers a number of opportunities to respond to statements about their own roles as teachers, the role of the team and the mix of skills within the team or programme area. They were also asked if team morale had any impact on retention and achievement.

The teachers were asked in interview to expand on these responses and the responses given on their questionnaires about departmental / faculty leadership, the role of senior curriculum leadership within the college and the emphasis placed on improving teaching and learning.

The interviews also tried to determine what mechanisms existed to acknowledge / reward effective teaching, opportunities for staff development and the availability of administrative / clerical support.

Teachers of courses with high retention and achievement

Respondents on courses with the highest retention and achievement were those who gave their fullest attention to teaching and learning, both as individual teachers and as members of a team. More importantly, effective teachers and effective teams proved to be relatively autonomous. In one highly successful college, a senior management team had fostered this autonomy through a strong commitment to improving teaching and learning. In another, however, a successful team had operated for a year without a section leader or head of department and was now running courses with high retention and achievement in an annexe some distance from the main campus and rarely visited by senior management.

While management did have a significant role to play in supporting course teams, it was noticeable that interviewees believed that most autonomous teams developed because teachers wished to distance themselves from senior management teams perceived as being dictatorial and too far removed from what one teacher called 'the real business of teaching and learning'.

All respondents saw teamwork as crucial to both effective teaching and student success. The best teams consisted of experienced, qualified practitioners who were interested in student success and whose team meetings focused on comprehensive, detailed planning and delivery, sharing good practice in teaching and learning as well as monitoring individual student progress. Effective teams had high morale, met regularly and resolved any differences between them at team meetings. They believed that students always knew if they were being taught by a happy and stable team and responded accordingly.

They also believed a good team set sound ground rules for students and always tried to motivate and inspire them:

The team has been solid for several years. We all know what we're doing and the students have got the best tutor they could have for each particular part of their course.

Having the right mix of team members was also felt to be important and the best teams usually had full-time members of staff with complementary skills, excellent teaching ability and, in the case of vocational programmes, a strong industrial background. It is interesting to note that effective teams can also cope with staff turnover and increased use of part-time staff. This ability appears to be linked with team autonomy since commitment to the team was seen as more important than commitment to the section manager or departmental head. What most teams had in common, however, was 'a commitment to do the best for students'.

The best teams focused on students by holding timetabled meetings and reviewing the progress of 'at risk' students regularly, sometimes weekly. All teams had formal minutes and often did their own paperwork in the absence of clerical support. Teams placed strong emphasis both on curriculum issues and tracking student progress through up-to-date files and log books. In one college good practice was shared between departments and strong ground rules were set for all students. Staff at this college – like most teachers whose courses had high retention and achievement – also expressed a strong belief in treating students as individuals because, in their view, 'at the end of the day the students are our customers'.

To conclude, teachers whose courses had the highest retention and achievement reinforced the view that the most effective teams were autonomous. Few teams, however, had actually been empowered by senior managers to be so. Most had taken autonomy on themselves because they did not feel supported by senior managers, line managers or, sometimes, even departmental clerical workers. Generally speaking, the most effective teams set themselves high standards, which they refused to lower in the face of adversity. Disenchantment with management implied that they were more driven by their view of general professional standards of teaching rather than by those standards developed within the college. It is interesting to note that most interviewees' responses were focused on their team and what the team did to support students and each other, rather than on the leadership of more remote college managers. This was accompanied by some tart comments about the absence of rewards for their efforts. One teacher whose high retention and achievement was still improving commented that there were:

never any positives, but management quickly pick up on negatives – this can lead to student disgruntlement, but in this instance it led to staff–student collusion against college management.

There were, however, many positive comments about staff development, which was felt to boost staff morale and assist retention and achievement. At the same time, some respondents felt staff development sometimes focused on what most concerned managers rather than what really supported teachers. There was also some comment that clerical support, where it existed, freed teachers from major administrative burdens and allowed them to concentrate more on course preparation or being able to put in extra time helping students in difficulty.

Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement

On low baseline courses there were mixed responses to the function and role of the teacher and the team. Many were complacent about the course team while others said that their teams had grown stale over time or lost key members. Other teams never met or, if they did, they felt under pressure because they were constantly being asked to respond to new management-led developments, not always connected with classroom practice. Several respondents admitted to being in a team whose members not only felt negative about all aspects of college work but also conveyed these attitudes to students in class. As a member of a team with high retention and achievement put it:

Students are very clever; they soon find out if a teacher's bothered about them and – I probably shouldn't say it – but some teachers don't really care if their students pass or fail and don't feel accountable. Some teachers take the attitude, 'Oh no! I don't teach below advanced level, that's beneath me.'

Paradoxically, teachers whose courses had low retention and achievement rates sometimes retained a strong belief in the team and associated student failings with other areas of the college; thus, one respondent thought 'The team is excellent. The problem is the students and their low attention spans.' During interviews, a number of criticisms of team focus or procedures were voiced. One teacher said that the problem was that team meetings were about management issues and self-assessment, not about teaching and learning. A second claimed that most of his time was taken up with college administration and that he had little time for teaching and learning let alone anything else. Other criticisms about the lack of administrative support were also voiced. In one college, for example, a respondent said that poor clerical support meant that students often did not receive a reply to their enquiries or were sent inappropriate information. In the same college, staff development was said to be reserved for the favoured few.

In other colleges, however, teams had problems holding meetings because their members came from different departments. One interviewee said that his team meetings were not organised and team leadership was poor. This led to staff backbiting about each other in front of their classes. One teacher said that there were no systems to monitor student progress in place, so that the students were 'freewheeling along'.

Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement, therefore, were generally the most aggrieved about their status and working conditions. They perceived they were doing all that they could in circumstances largely beyond their control. They conveyed the impression that team members were unloved, unsupported and understaffed. Some of their failures in retention and achievement were attributed to poor cover arrangements and others blamed on colleges now employing too many part-time staff, who knew very little about the education system or the students they were teaching. As well as blaming their problems on others there was also some evidence that these issues and attitudes were taken into the classroom and conveyed to students. In one instance, for example, teachers were so dissatisfied by senior management proposals for redundancies and restructuring that they expressed their anxieties to their students – with the effect that all of the students left the programme within the next few months!

Teachers of courses where high retention and achievement are declining

Teachers on courses where previously high retention and achievement rates were now declining were mostly neutral in their responses, but several teachers felt that a lack of individual support made them feel weighed down by 'an onerous, burdensome workload'. This was particularly true of staff who were solely responsible for the delivery of a course or programme. One member of staff in that position felt that she was 'lonely and pressurised', a feeling heightened by the fact that she believed there was 'no reward for getting results anyway'.

Teachers also had a more negative attitude to senior managers, who were blamed for deliberately reducing team numbers and relying more and more on part-time staff to cover the gaps. In one instance, it was claimed this practice often meant that specialist areas were covered inadequately or the team had been forced to 'cobble together missing elements of expertise'. In another college, a teacher's enthusiasm began to wane because of a feeling that senior managers had stopped listening to staff and 'all new ideas are scotched'. Others attributed declining retention and achievement to senior managers' inability to respond positively to the need to provide cover when staff were absent or ill. These responses were similar to those of staff teaching on courses with low retention and achievement.

Most respondents also said it was difficult to find time to meet and when they did there was no time to focus on the learners and their progress. One admitted that the team's administration was unprofessional and that little monitoring of student progress took place. Again, teachers tended to blame what they perceived as an emphasis by senior managers on paperwork and form-filling rather than the need to have personal communication about the students:

It's important to monitor students carefully to ensure their progress is under review and so that we can ensure their results are in line with their target grades ... but when I filled this questionnaire in I was of the strong opinion that I wasn't able to administer that task in a professional way because of the amount of time needed to do that kind of exercise.

What was particularly interesting about these responses is that there often appeared to be a specific pattern to the decline in retention and achievement in courses / programmes which had started from a high baseline in 1996/97. Usually, one or more incident had led to a lowering of individual or team morale. This might have been triggered by increased workloads, team members becoming ill or absent or a general perception that line managers and senior management teams were paying less attention to teaching, learning and staff development. In one instance, a college manager refused to allow an annual end-of-year student art exhibition to continue on the grounds of 'health and safety', leading to the teacher involved feeling bitter and unappreciated. Since then, her course retention and achievement rates had begun to decline.

Teachers of courses where low retention and achievement are improving

By contrast, there was evidence to show that teachers whose courses had begun to improve retention and achievement from a low baseline were demonstrating greater team autonomy. Team members became a more united, more close-knit group, developed a team philosophy and placed greater emphasis on improving teaching and learning. One team was enabled to do this through a new senior manager who supported staff and wanted to improve quality, but other teams developed a more autonomous way of working through their own initiative. Although one team member claimed that team meetings were mostly unstructured and about 'fire-fighting', most interviewees claimed that the introduction of structured, timetabled team meetings, which shared information about the students, had led to improvements in retention and achievement. This seemed particularly effective when teams identified weaker students at an early stage and began tracking their progress. One team had also introduced course reviews which include student representatives.

Teachers, however, did not attribute improvements in retention and achievement to any significant changes in academic or vocational staffing levels. Conversely, they did emphasise positive support from immediate line managers, and staff development activities which valued the teacher and sought to improve strategies for teaching and learning. In one or two colleges it was clear that major improvements were taking place in staff development and one had a new head of department who was said to be excellent. In the same college, because all heads of department were demonstrating a revived interest in teaching and learning, it was thought that this put pressure on more senior managers and they might change too. Another interviewee expressed a similar view but in more detail:

Immediate managers have an understanding of teaching and learning and staff needs. Senior managers adopt a top-down approach and usually set up teams to solve problems without asking the people who actually know. We get little support from senior management, only edicts from above.

Management support and appropriate staff development is also a significant factor in helping individuals and teams develop autonomy. When managers make positive interventions to support teaching and learning, morale rises and creates a climate where individuals and teams feel encouraged to find their own strategies for improvement. Once semi-autonomy becomes established, teams are then able to organise structured team meetings to improve the quality of their own provision further.

Teacher attitudes to student cohorts and student support

The interviews looked more closely at teachers' responses relating to student ability and qualifications on entry. Teachers were also asked to comment on the amount of part-time work students did and the impact financial or personal problems might have on their studies. Finally, the teachers were asked to evaluate whether the range of student services available had a positive or negative impact on retention and achievement.

This aspect of the survey attracted by far the most comment at interview. Teacher perceptions, however, proved to be difficult to interpret and understand.

Teachers of courses with high retention and achievement

On courses with high retention and achievement that were still improving, staff thought there was a particular problem about students' entry qualifications, as they felt under more pressure to take on students with limited qualifications. Most teams resisted this pressure and continued to select students carefully. In one college, students were not only expected to have strong entry qualifications, but the interview process also focuses on future career prospects and whether the course they have in mind will enable them to progress successfully.

There was also a general view that while adult student motivation remained high, the 16–19-year-old student cohort was less committed to learning than in previous years. Teachers felt that the main reasons for this lay in most students having part-time jobs and more personal problems interfering with their studies. Students were felt to be 'not as systematic and hard-working'. One respondent felt:

Some students' part-time work commitments are more important to them than their commitment to college – they don't attend as well or achieve as highly as they could.

Although teachers appeared to have a very pessimistic view of changes to their student cohorts, this was not reflected by what they did, in practice, to support students. Once students were enrolled, there was a willingness to provide them with a high level of personal support and to refer them on to specialists when it was more appropriate to do so. This was done through early identification of 'at risk' students and referrals to student services at an early stage of the course. On one course it was felt that personal tutoring had prevented quite a few students from leaving and parental involvement was sought and encouraged.

On one successful programme, staff put on additional support workshops in their own time and all students had to attend at least one lunchtime drop-in workshop and report back in class on what they did there. Another teacher ensured that:

Additional workshops were put on in exam techniques and requirements for the students who needed them and I think it was beneficial for them. It helped them to improve their performance.

Where courses were maintaining a high level of retention and achievement, teachers' statements about how they dealt with their student cohorts tended to be quite positive. While there was broad agreement that current 16–19-year-old students were not as academic as they used to be and that part-time employment was an important issue, many felt that teachers could and should cope with these realities by employing a range of strategies. One respondent suggested, for example, that students needed clearer information about college courses, the amount of work involved and the distinctions between course levels. Appropriate strategies should therefore focus on improving information, advice, guidance and induction. Another felt that tutors should develop counselling skills in order to ensure that personal problems did not overwhelm any student's ability to study. Staff in most teams also appeared proactive in providing study skills, organising additional support and referring students on to student services.

Teachers of part-time courses, which were maintaining high retention and achievement, used the same attitudes and approaches. One fractional postholder said that she was always in her part-time class 15 minutes before the lesson began and stayed there for 15 minutes afterwards. This enabled her to provide extra support for students because they knew she would be there. She also stressed the importance of helping part-time students to support each other and letting them know what student support facilities were available in the college and their right to access them.

Most teachers interviewed also thought it important to act quickly over student absenteeism and to give prompt support to any student whose lack of progress was a cause for concern. Emphasis was also placed on initial assessment / diagnostic testing and tutorial systems, which tracked student progress using one-to-one reviews.

Teachers on courses with high levels of retention and achievement occasionally expressed a view that the Educational Maintenance Award (EMA) was also a significant recent development, since it did help some students with financial problems to stay on course and succeed. Not surprisingly, this view was most prevalent in courses which recruited from areas of high rural or urban deprivation.

Interestingly, most teachers at this level did not particularly emphasise teaching methods as a significant factor in retention and achievement, although one teacher stressed that what was taught should always be relevant and also use students' own experiences. Instead, far more emphasis was placed on the importance of understanding students as individuals and motivating them to succeed. This was seen as an ongoing process, necessary to keep students on track. Appropriate literacy and numeracy support was also an important element, as was a need to encourage students to succeed beyond their own expectations. One teacher said that she particularly encouraged individual aspirations and personal ambitions, because students were often too self-effacing or came to college with relatively low expectations.

Another stressed the importance of motivating students to take on individual responsibility for their own learning. This view is exemplified in the following statements from teachers:

We take students seriously and give them time and effort. Students appreciate help with their assignments and all students go to additional support.

Modern students have low attention spans and are not as academic as they were. This has to be compensated for by better understanding of principles of learning and students need to be more open with staff about their problems and their part-time work.

The student cohort has changed significantly, but I'm not blaming the students. We need to respond to them and not the other way round. General cultural attitudes of young people are changing anyway.

These last two quotes may help to explain why retention and achievement remained high on courses with a high baseline position. There remains the paradox, however, that teachers on courses which started with high retention and achievement rates, and which improved still further, were generally rather critical of changes in the attitude and capability of their younger students. When pressed at interview, however, teachers on these courses agreed that while their students were still staying on course and achieving, they were thought not to be the 'high flyers' of yester-year, nor were they thought to be getting as many grade As or distinctions. Neither of these aspects of the student cohort was systematically tested in the research. It is not, therefore, possible to evaluate these perspectives in more detail.

Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement

Teachers on courses with the lowest retention and achievement mostly appeared unconcerned about student qualifications on entry. One thought that entry criteria for his course were a 'grey area'; another said that the college only recruited with 'bums on seats' in mind and that many of these students would not be retained. In his opinion, what Marketing needed to do was to find teachers the 'right' students. One teacher whose course had low retention and achievement, which was still falling, believed that the role of the teacher and what constituted a good lesson had never changed. What had changed was 'the pressure for data and justifying data. So that makes one take on weak students and get rid of them as soon as possible.' This view was shared by another respondent who said that too much time was taken up by teachers working on college procedures and that, as a team leader, he only had 3 hours of remission to deal with 300 students. He felt that his skills had been so adversely affected that he concluded, 'I wouldn't like to be taught by myself.'

Overall, teachers whose classes had the lowest level of retention and achievement had the most pessimistic view of the impact of changes in teaching and learning. Students, in their view, were only under pressure because they were unable to complete work and had problems at home anyway. Some interviewees were even more critical and saw their student intakes as 'dire' and 'of low ability'. In their view, the introduction of EMAs in some areas simply added to the problem by making a bad student cohort worse. EMAs simply brought in students who 'just want the money' and were 'a disruptive element that drives better students away'. In one instance, interestingly, one interviewee chose to link EMAs and ability with race, suggesting that 'we're seen as an Asian college now' and 'two-thirds of our problem is Asian girls'.

Not surprisingly, a teacher on one of these teams and new to the profession had only encountered negative colleagues. While he could recognise the impact that these negative attitudes had on retention and achievement, he felt unable to change things. He had received an impression from his colleagues that regardless of what your teaching aspirations might have been, the everyday reality was 'You're just expected to get on with the job.'

Although one or two staff who were interviewed claimed to offer personal support to students, most saw gaps in the system as beyond their control. There was a general feeling that individual 'key staff' were solely responsible for student support and things generally went wrong if and when such staff left. Learning support was also felt by one respondent to be 'hit and miss'. This respondent also suggested that instead of offering support what really needed to be done with weak students was to 'filter them out' of a programme. One or two teachers thought the onus was on students to seek help by themselves if they needed it – it was their responsibility and nobody else's.

These teachers did not express the same kind of view as teachers on courses where high retention and achievement were still improving. Instead, many teachers whose courses had low and declining retention and achievement appeared to be willing to label students, and stereotype them in terms of race, gender and class. Nor did these teachers want to identify possible solutions. Views were expressed that 'it takes too long to determine "at risk" students' or that students on the courses had 'a general culture of not succeeding ... not being on time, not handing work in on time – lack ability to think about their futures'.

Teachers of courses where high retention and achievement are declining

Teachers of courses where high retention and achievement were declining gave mostly neutral responses in this section of the original questionnaire. This was reinforced during the interviews and most respondents felt that changes to teaching had no impact on retention and achievement. There was some evidence, however, that they blamed college managers for making them recruit weak students who would leave, while others admitted they needed to review admissions and induction procedures. Several interviewees felt there was no longer enough time to monitor student progress in class or to give individuals the attention they deserved.

The majority, however, had similar attitudes to teachers of courses with low retention and achievement. They claimed that because 'support for weak students is finite', too many 'at risk' students were identified too late so it was impossible to help them anyway. It was also thought that students took on part-time jobs primarily 'to fund a student lifestyle' and too much part-time work made them too tired to study at college – not that they had any study skills anyway! One teacher managed to link most of these issues together and claimed that many students on the course should not be there in the first place, so it was hardly surprising that they were not retained and did not achieve.

Another summarised most of the views expressed by saying that the course recruited:

Weak non-achievers ... who have personal problems ... they are immature and not prepared to study in a serious way. They have been turned away from better colleges and taken on here. They are accepted even though it is known they will not be retained.

Teachers of courses where low retention and achievement are improving

The most positive responses came from teachers on courses with low retention and achievement which were improving. The majority of these had started to resist pressure for 'bums on seats' and had become much more proactive in dealing with students' initial enquiries themselves and 'selling' the course enthusiastically. Teams also appear to have reviewed recruitment, induction, and teaching and learning and put new systems in place. One team did not enrol students until the end of week 2 so that students had sufficient experience of the programme to know that it was exactly what they wanted. Two teams had also reviewed and improved teaching and learning so that teaching methods were more student centred. Most teams felt they were more aware of issues affecting students' social lives and their problems at home by collecting more data and making use of it. One teacher, for example, accepted that there was a problem about student part-time jobs, but had also discovered one student who had to work at a fast-food outlet to support his mother. Another believed that part-time work which complemented a vocational course ought to be encouraged and that the EMA, far from being a negative factor, was actually a godsend in what was a very deprived area. Several teachers also said they were now taking steps to develop student motivation and correct any misconceptions students had about the courses as early as possible.

One team leader of a foundation programme felt that all her teachers had to have a commitment not only to teach students at that level, but also a willingness to develop a strong supportive relationship with the group and the individuals within it. By recruiting staff who had those qualities, she felt that:

I've now got a very good teaching team ... who want to know about the students as individuals – they care about them and we're all very positive. Our attitude to student success is 'yes we can do it and yes, we will do it!'

Teachers on successful courses at all levels also believed that staff–student relationships and relationships between peers were of particular importance. Most also emphasised the need to ensure that negative peer pressure should not be allowed to impact on retention and achievement. In one college this danger was countered by encouraging strong students to support weaker ones as 'buddies'. Another course team went out of its way to have an enjoyable induction programme that both laid ground rules and built up a group identity. One very committed team leader of a vocational course that had shown rapid improvement said of her group:

They're not the best motivated of students, but you have to tap into their uniqueness to help them become motivated. At the moment the students are fasting for Ramadan, so yesterday I fasted so I could gain their respect and understand more of what they're going through and how difficult it is.

It may seem surprising that staff on low baseline improving courses seem to have more positive responses to this area of activity than staff on courses with high retention and achievement. This may be because teachers on low baseline courses are discovering their autonomy as teachers and as teams and are more conscious of their power to make a difference, whereas teachers with high retention and achievement appear sometimes to take those skills for granted. These differences, however, become less apparent when comparing interview responses on personal tutoring.

Curriculum, assessment and tutorial support

The questions in this section asked teachers to rate the impact of curriculum-related issues such as course content, level and scheme of work on student retention and achievement. They were also asked about students' understanding of assessment and other factors linked to individual progress and achievement. In the light of recent developments in one-to-one tutorials, target setting and review, and action planning, respondents were particularly asked to comment on their impact on student retention and achievement.

Teachers of courses with high retention and achievement

Effective teachers saw the curriculum as an important element in student retention and achievement and believed in the systematic preparation of student-centred schemes of work which are interesting and stimulating, but do not involve any 'dumbing down'. Courses with high retention and achievement included a strong practical element (for both academic and non-academic courses) and addressed literacy/numeracy support needs at an early stage. Responses about key skills, however, were ambivalent. Some teachers saw them as a valuable initiative while others did not. Generally speaking, teams thought it more important to plan enrichment activities that complement the main course (including outside speakers, residentials etc) and to ensure that all students are tracked and supported throughout their programmes.

Traditionally, when I came here 4 years ago the retention rate for computing was poor, so one of the things I was keen to do was to actually address that by offering ICT as an alternative, because it had a strong user focus and was more relevant to student needs.

Effective teachers who commented in detail about student assessment put students at the centre of the system. There was a general view that students 'need to feel they're achieving. If you work for them, they'll work for you.' Team members, therefore, saw assessment as a key part of improving student achievement, often emphasising that it was a two-way process in which the student has as much input as the teacher.

The team made things more manageable for the students so that it was clearer to them how much assessment they would face and when. Because they could see the structure better they were more encouraged.

While it may be of help for an institution or team to have an assessment policy, assessment handbooks and log books, teachers placed more emphasis on students having a clear understanding of how they are assessed and the criteria they are being assessed against. There was a strong view expressed by several respondents that assessment should be scheduled and manageable with a particular emphasis on assessment early on in the course, so that students can understand the assessment criteria and apply their understanding to improve their work. It was also felt important that students should experience early success and be given both detailed, constructive feedback and individual support to improve. When students had confidence in their ability to achieve, they could then be encouraged to do more of their own research and adopt a more reflective approach to their learning.

It was interesting to note that courses with the highest retention and achievement had teachers who were both sensitive to the demands assessment makes on students and the need to make assessment tasks more comprehensible and achievable, but without losing any rigour. One team ensured that on a low-level practical course assessment was as skill-based and as non-threatening as possible. Another team used innovative course-builder software to set up assessments on the college's intranet. One respondent also pointed out that teachers need to be aware that college assessment schedules and processes:

do not always take account of the fact that a student's personal problems can, on occasions, interfere with their work and that it is no good putting them under pressure to achieve without resolving the problems. Pressure to get students to complete assignments when they are experiencing major personal problems is more liable to facilitate drop-out than aid retention.

Teachers on courses with the highest retention and achievement saw recent changes to tutorial systems as one of the most important developments covered by the questionnaire. This is because one-to-one tutorials, in particular, provided a forum in which students can review progress, give their own feedback and discuss any barriers to learning. Most tutoring systems involve three review and action planning sessions per year although two colleges have open-access systems with tutoring 'on demand' and where those who need it most receive more support.

Teachers on high performing courses saw tutorials as providing students with help and direction to match their particular needs. They believe that tutorials show students that they are valued as individuals and that this is also a forum to praise student achievements and resolve individual pressures. Comments like 'We have a brilliant system', 'We're doing even more to improve things' and 'It's the most important factor in retention and achievement' were very noticeable among this group. One respondent said:

All our students are closely monitored through tutorials and through their individual tutor. If you see that they're having trouble you can help them, and hopefully sort it out, whether it be with their coursework or their personal problems ... I think we're good at picking up students who won't come forward for help. You can see the signs when they go quiet or they're walking around with a sour face.

Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement

Teachers of courses / programmes with a low baseline and declining retention and achievement appeared to be either complacent about the curriculum or just assumed no changes were necessary. Some of those whose courses were in most decline confessed to having no schemes of work and / or no enrichment. On one course students were not given handouts because they were expected to buy their own books, even though many chose not to do so. On another course, the students had been labelled as 'not interested in the curriculum anyway'.

Those interviewed also saw assessment and feedback as one of their least important priorities. They had either no view on the matter or felt their teams knew what they were doing so there was not a problem. Two respondents, however, blamed the students, either for not understanding their assessment requirements in the first place or for failing to complete assessments 'because they (adult students) were trying to juggle too many commitments'. One teacher suggested that the reasons some students didn't hand work in was that they didn't *want* to achieve at that level, while another said that high drop out was inevitable.

While one or two teachers on courses with low retention and achievement were positive about tutorials, most comments were similar to those that follow:

You can't alter bad students, they're more influenced by peer pressure.

If they're happy they stay, if they're not they go. Last year we let too many waifs and strays in.

On several courses, especially those where retention and achievement were still falling, there was either no tutorial system at all or it was claimed tutorials didn't work because the staff were disaffected.

Teachers of courses where high retention and achievement are declining

Teachers on courses with a high baseline in retention and achievement, but which were now declining, had begun to adopt some of the attitudes displayed by teachers on low baseline courses. They accepted that their courses were becoming 'bog standard' or out of touch with both student needs and the needs of industry, but felt unable to do anything about it. This loss of faith in the quality of their own curriculum led to some conveying their uncertainty and negativity to their students. Other staff claimed that there was nothing wrong with the curriculum, only the students. Because students were generally thought to be of low ability, it was claimed that they found struggling with academic concepts increasingly difficult and that teachers had insufficient time allocations to cover topics in the detail that such students required.

Teachers also attributed their problems to a mixture of factors both within and beyond their control. There was a view that staff did not always understand the assessment process themselves or that too much reliance was placed on giving students an assessment handbook and assuming that they would read it. One interviewee felt that students had too much assessment, with too many assignments being required at the same time; another thought was that assessment was becoming less rigorous and that, even then, the students were not up to the required assessment level. In one instance, staff imposed very rigid deadlines and refused to accept student work after the required date. There was also a general complaint that students no longer did homework because they were too busy earning money in part-time employment.

So far as tutorials were concerned, most teachers claimed there was either not enough time to run one-to-one sessions or that senior managers were not prepared to develop newer and more effective tutorial systems.

Teachers of courses where low retention and achievement are improving

Conversely, teachers on courses where retention and achievement were improving were adopting strategies similar to those with already high baselines. Through benchmarking and seeking support from external bodies and exam boards, teams had begun to plan more effectively, update content and add enrichment and interest. More attention was being paid to ensuring that entry qualifications matched the demands of the curriculum and that both the curriculum and student progress were reviewed systematically.

Teachers were beginning to adopt the same assessment practices as teachers on high baseline courses. Care was being taken that students now understood the assessment process and evidence requirements, and efforts were being made, especially on lower-level courses, to motivate students to achieve. One teacher was rewriting assignments to make them more interesting, humorous and relevant, while another was introducing more support for basic skills.

Teachers were also developing their tutorial systems to review student progress and believed that retention and achievement had improved as a result. They felt that monitoring individual student progress was crucial and, where necessary, would involve seeing students regularly on a one-to-one basis. One teacher had trained as a counsellor and was now able to give students individual support to resolve what were, in many cases, major crises. As another teacher put it, 'If you're supported and cared for, you're more likely to work through problems.'

Finally, most interviewees thought that a strong induction process was crucial to retention and achievement and that this programme had to involve active learning and, ideally, should be fun. One course team leader organised one generic induction programme for all levels of student, partly to ensure they were enrolled at the most suitable level, but mostly to instil a sense of course identity and the idea that learning was a positive and pleasurable experience. As she put it 'my students have got to have a feel-good factor by the end of the week'.

Quality systems, resources and timetabling

Questions on quality asked teachers to evaluate the impact of changes in a number of processes such as self-assessment, management information systems (MIS) and the observations of teaching and learning. They were also asked to talk about positive or negative changes to preparation time, the number of teaching hours they had and the availability of essential equipment and technical support. In addition, they had the opportunity to rate the accommodation provided for their course or programme. Finally, teachers were asked to assess the impact of changes to course hours and periods timetabled for teaching and private study.

As might perhaps be expected, this proved to be another contentious area and teacher attitudes were divided. Some quality systems were perceived as directly relating to teaching and learning, but others were seen as directly controlled by senior management and not related to classroom activity (eg MIS, management-led target setting).

Teachers of courses with high retention and achievement

Most teachers on courses with high retention and achievement believed that the crucial element of quality improvement was to act on information received, whether it was from MIS, student feedback, the observation of teaching and learning, internal or external verifiers, or self-assessment. Where systems were management led and focused on MIS, however, other staff views often echoed those of one respondent who said, 'You're just chasing paperwork which then goes into a black hole.'

The general view was that 'the teaching observation system with positive feedback has far more impact than MIS' and that 'direct contact with students tells you whether they are content or not'. Some respondents, however, had particularly positive views about observations:

More observation of each other's teaching leads to sharing of good practice and we certainly increased the observation of each other's teaching – peer observation as well as observation for the sake of appraisal.

As well as using the college's general questionnaire we increased the amount of feedback we were getting from students by using our own subject questionnaire and used the outcomes to feed into our action planning and scheme of work planning.

Interviewees also made a clear distinction between human resources and other resources they thought necessary for students to complete their programmes successfully. A significant number of staff on courses with high retention and achievement rates were dissatisfied with both types of resource and claimed these were having a negative impact on retention and achievement. There was dissatisfaction with the number of teaching hours, remission (regarded by one respondent as 'a joke') and the poor quality of many learning environments. Interestingly, one course was given a grade 1 at inspection, despite the fact that it was thought to be run in poor accommodation. Several teachers cited the fact that vocational resources were many years out of date. Another respondent complained that essential day-to-day resources were never ordered on time, commenting, 'We can do anything provided we haven't got it!'

There was, however, clearly a division between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Staff on some courses with high retention and achievement rates had equipment of current commercial and industrial standard, housed in modern, state-of-the art accommodation. Other colleges had well-advanced intranets and new buildings where classrooms were equipped with electronic whiteboards. This division is interesting. Although lack of resources did not seem to be impacting on retention and achievement, staff on several high achieving courses clearly felt that they were, and may have been, making compensatory efforts in other areas of activity to make up for the 'shortfall'.

It is also clear that students are aware of poor quality and do convey their sense of dissatisfaction to staff when learning environments are below par and there are insufficient and often outdated resources and equipment. One interviewee pointed out that students were perfectly capable of comparing the poor resources available at one college with better facilities elsewhere and 'voting with their feet' when learning resources and learning environments do not live up to their expectations.

Staff on courses with high retention and achievement were largely neutral about delivery hours, but did say that the timetable was now tight, particularly as students appeared to place less importance on self-study. One teacher expressed the view that while the most able students were better at managing their own time, others required additional study periods which needed to be staffed and timetabled. Most believed there should be no significant gaps in a student's time at college and that catch-up weeks are now essential to ensure ongoing assessment of learning and give students time to catch up on assignment work.

Teachers of courses with low retention and achievement

Teachers on courses with low or declining retention and achievement seemed to be either complacent about the quality of their provision or adopted the attitude that quality was already embedded in the team and 'we know what's best'. MIS were generally regarded to be 'useless' and one respondent thought that student retention was better before there were any quality systems in place that suggested otherwise. Those on courses with declining retention and achievement were the most critical. One teacher stated, rather acerbically, 'Quality is a euphemism for paperwork, isn't it?' Another blamed college management for having quality systems in place but never acting on student feedback. This, it was claimed, lowered student morale on the course in question and led to a downward spiral so far as retention and achievement were concerned.

This concern about quality became even more apparent when teachers began talking about learning resources. One teacher cited instances of students able to word-process work, but unable to print it off because the printers had broken down. Another claimed his workshop was now 40 years out of date and no longer relevant to the present syllabus. The most negative comments suggested that human resources were almost as overused as some of the workshop equipment because staff had no time to prepare lessons, had insufficient delivery time and had to deal with too much college paperwork. On timetabling, half the staff thought the issue of little significance, while the rest had a general view that students did not use gaps in their day effectively. One teacher said that in his college timetabling 'did not focus on students and their needs. Catch-up time was not allowed because college managers are only interested in the economics of teaching hours rather than their function in relation to learning.'

Teachers of courses where high retention and achievement are declining

Where previously high retention and achievement rates were declining, teachers were divided between the views that 'quality is fine' and that 'quality is non-existent'. No interviewees made any positive or negative comments about actual quality systems in place, although there was a complaint that 'strategies seem to be used as a process rather than getting results'.

When asked about resources, however, these respondents made the most negative comments of all. Although one or two thought this was not a key issue (because teaching methods were of far more significance) there was growing frustration that mismanagement of human (and other) resources made teachers look incompetent in the classroom. One teacher complained that 'the OHPs don't work, the computers frequently crash and that makes the students lose confidence'. Another commented that a lack of preparation time and insufficient full-time staff 'means teachers come across as harassed, lacking preparation and stressed'.

On timetabling, most teachers claimed that managers were not timetabling effectively. In one college there were many room changes at the start of the college year and it was felt some lack of retention could be attributed to this. In another, the complaint was that managers appeared not to take student concentration spans into account and had timetabled some teaching sessions to be 4 hours long. One vocational course had had its full-time hours reduced to 15 a week, which meant that not only did students have insufficient time to complete the practical work involved, but this also had an impact on the quantity and quality of the work they were able to produce, both affecting achievement. Where timetabling still involved gaps between sessions, several instances were given of students not making efficient or effective use of free time. Another view expressed about self-directed study was:

It's just a cheap way of running education. You throw the onus on the student and they sink or swim. It's a cost-cutting exercise. I think it's one of the most important things in terms of retention and achievement.

Teachers of courses where low retention and achievement are improving

There were some positive responses about quality from teachers on courses where low retention and achievement rates are improving. Yet while there was praise for systems in place for the observation of teaching and learning and even the inspection process, there were still very negative views about management-controlled quality systems.

The quality system is a joke – written for academics – and far more importance is attached to it than there ought to be.

The mixed responses to quality systems and, in particular, the negative views of what were perceived as management-led systems, would suggest some of the other types of change (notably teaching, curriculum and assessment) are seen by teachers as having a greater positive impact on student success.

Views about resources were equally conflicting. On the one hand, there are those who believe new resources are directly linked to a rise in retention and achievement. On the other hand, retention and achievement are also rising on courses where, as one respondent put it, 'there is out-of-date equipment, lack of computers, poor classrooms and too much use of acetates and board-work'. On another course retention and achievement were improving, despite the fact that the teacher reported the equipment to be 'poor and frequently broken' and that there was 'a lack of access to computers and software'.

Few teachers linked improvements in retention and achievement to timetabling. Most had no comment to make, and the few who did comment reiterated the problem of students having too many gaps between lessons or teaching hours being crammed because of limited teaching time being allocated to a full-time course.

Overall perceptions of factors most affecting retention and achievement

In the original questionnaire the final question listed 13 types of factors and teachers were asked to select three factors where changes had a largely negative impact on retention and achievement and three changes which had a largely positive effect. The interviews sought to explore this issue further and asked teachers to identify one positive and one negative factor that they thought most affected retention and achievement.

As might be expected from the discussion so far, teachers who taught on teams with the highest retention and achievement focused on key elements of teaching and learning as being the most important factors associated with high retention and achievement. There was a belief that students must be on the right course in the first place and taught by well-trained, well-qualified staff teaching well-prepared lessons. This meant recruiting with integrity, a curriculum delivered in an interesting way and programmes enriched beyond the minimum. Teachers felt that there should be excellent communication between staff and students and that students should receive lots of attention and care.

Tutorials were thought to be essential in tracking student achievement. Students should experience early achievement or accreditation to help retain motivation as the course got under way. Not surprisingly, teachers on these courses saw themselves as the keystones of the whole process:

Staff dedication overcomes problems with resources, lack of admin and lack of support. If staff stood back, retention and achievement would collapse.

Most felt that the major negative factors affecting retention and achievement of both adults and 16–19 year olds were their personal problems. A minority felt that the key issues were either students being on an inappropriate course or poor college facilities and a poor learning environment.

Teachers on courses with low retention and achievement listed the same positive factors, although in rather less detail. Their negative factors, however, reinforced the perception gained from other responses that they considered these outside their control. They said that lack of management support, lack of resources and low morale led to poor retention and achievement, as did the recruitment of poor quality students.

Teachers on courses where previously high retention and achievement had declined identified many of the same positive factors. They saw the most positive factors as a strong team, good teachers and motivated students receiving strong tutorial support. The negative factors were similar to those cited by teams with low retention and achievement: lack of preparation time and resources, low morale and an inability, because of these, to meet student expectations.

Teachers on low baseline courses which were improving their retention and achievement, however, were much closer in their responses to teams with the highest retention and achievement. Responses here focused on the fact that students should be recruited with integrity and that induction should be used to ensure their suitability for the programme. It was also thought that teachers should provide an interesting curriculum, teach to students' preferred learning styles and ensure that they had, generally, a good experience of college. They should have good staff who were always supportive and continuously motivating their students to succeed.

Teachers on improving courses also identified a mixture of negative features which they felt would lead to low retention and achievement. Two of these were staff related and suggested that staff with negative attitudes would create the climate for non-attendance, as would long lectures without any student interaction. They also cited factors beyond the lecturer's control, such as poor resourcing and lack of staffing. Moreover, retention and achievement was identified as difficult to improve if students were unsuitable for the course in the first place, lacked motivation and were poor attendees.

Drawing some conclusions

The survey and interviews generated a huge amount of rich, detailed, sometimes contradictory and always fascinating information about teacher perceptions of changes in a wide variety of factors which impacted on student retention and achievement.

In very general terms, the research points to both continuities and discontinuities in teacher views, and in their conceptualisation of the role of teachers and the factors associated with the effectiveness of student learning.

The elements of continuity and agreement within this large and diverse group were actually stronger than the researchers had initially supposed. In the survey, in particular, almost all teachers tended to emphasise the importance of good teaching, committed and knowledgeable teachers, effective recruitment, induction, monitoring student progress and tutoring, within the context of effective and supportive teams.

This broad consensus extends further, to the identification of factors in the survey which have a negative impact. Resources, particularly pressures on teaching time, because of changes to teaching hours and increased administration and paperwork, and poor or outdated accommodation or equipment, were seen as having the most negative impact. There was a similar consensus concerning what broadly could be considered as management failings. Where recruitment policies, timetabling, quality and management information systems were not thought to be learner focused, they were usually identified as negative factors. Somewhat surprisingly, moreover, there was some agreement across the whole group of teachers that students, particularly younger students, tended to be less highly motivated, and have less well-developed study skills and habits of successful learning, than had previously been the case.

There were also some quite pronounced examples of discontinuity, between teachers whose programmes had relatively high or low baseline positions, and whose retention and achievement rates, over the 3 years, were improving, remaining the same or declining.

This was particularly evident in relation to the views expressed in the survey by teachers on courses with high retention rates which had improved still further, compared with those whose retention and achievement rates had declined from a previously high position. Across the whole sample, teachers from improving, high baseline courses tended to be the *most* optimistic about the positive factors and the least pessimistic about the negative ones. Conversely, teachers on declining, high baseline courses tended to be *least* optimistic about the positive factors, including their own teaching, and were most pessimistic about the negative.

Contrary to expectations, in the survey at least, optimism about teaching and related positive factors tended to be high among teachers from declining, low baseline courses. Equally, and again contrary to expectations, teachers on improving, low baseline courses did not tend to express particularly optimistic views about their teaching.

This apparent paradox was explored, and to some extent explained, in the follow-up interviews, the discussion of which forms the major part of this report. Three main inferences can be drawn from the interviews concerning:

- the existence of significantly different ways that teachers think about teaching and their students
- the importance of largely implicit and unwritten contracts or agreements between teachers and students and between teachers and managers
- the implications of the research for future efforts to improve student retention and achievement rates in colleges, and perhaps by extension in work-based and adult and community education.

Teachers' views of teaching and students

The survey and the subsequent interviews offered teachers the opportunities to express their views on a wide range of issues likely to affect retention and achievement. Their responses indicate areas that most concerned them and imply some strongly held beliefs about their role as teachers and their attitudes to students.

Teachers on courses with high retention and achievement rates seem to conceptualise their job as being about teaching and learning and having the autonomy to make professional judgements. They would like to share this ethos with college managers, but seem able to embody it in their practice in any case, through the operation of more or less autonomous course or programme teams.

As individuals, these teachers also have a strong belief in their own knowledge, skills and expertise and in the quality of their teaching. This means that they welcomed the introduction of teaching observations and actively sought feedback from their students. Not surprisingly, the quality of human resources was seen to be of equal, and possibly greater, importance when compared with books, equipment and supportive learning environments.

These concepts have their strongest embodiment in these teachers' beliefs in strong, self-supporting and stable course teams who are multi-skilled and set themselves high standards in all areas of their work. Such teams focus on course content, curriculum delivery, supporting students and reviewing their progress.

Teachers on courses with the highest retention and achievement rates may express doubts about their students' entry qualifications and levels of ability, but they believe in recruitment with integrity and actively seek to understand the student cohort that they have to work with. Such teachers have a desire to support students and do their best for them. They identify 'at risk' students as early as possible and are sensitive to the demands the course makes on students as well as pressures they experience in their personal lives. They are also aware that today's young people have different cultural values, and hence recognise the need to have a timetable that ensures students are as fully occupied in learning as possible during the college day.

Such teachers also genuinely care about student progress and have a strong belief that students benefit from new tutoring processes involving target setting and review. Value-added systems for their own sake are not seen as the way forward. Old-fashioned as their view may be, the most successful teachers believe that students need 'tender loving care', something not necessarily always provided at home.

What might be inferred from these statements is an underlying concept of teaching which is based on an interaction and partnership between teachers and learners. Effective teachers in this context are teachers who adapt and develop their teaching to meet the needs of their learners.

Teachers on courses with low or declining retention and achievement appear to fall into two specific categories with regard to their concept of their role. One category of teachers believe that nothing about their role has changed or needs to change. They have a strong belief that they are already adequately fulfilling their professional role and that if things need changing they have little or no scope or autonomy to do so.

The second category of teachers on courses with low retention and achievement could be described as disenchanted, or even disaffected. They feel that their status has been undermined by management-led initiatives which are threatening enough when they involve changing professional practice, but overwhelmingly so when such changes coincide with restructuring.

Both category of teacher tend to turn to the course team for mutual support, largely to retain a sense of status and to reinforce the sense that someone else is to blame for poor retention and achievement. This blame usually attaches itself to senior managers or students, although some team members criticise each other for relatively poor performance on their courses.

Such teachers' attitudes towards their students seem to consist of blaming them for poor retention and achievement. Teachers, in their view, cannot deliver what senior managers want because the students are perceived as not having the necessary ability, are poorly motivated or have a culture which is not conducive to learning. These are not the type of student such teachers want and they are seen as actually being brought in by college management only for the funding units they represent. This may explain why some teachers in this category believe that a proportion of such students must be filtered out of the college as soon as possible. There is a belief that such students should not really be enrolled in the first place, because they don't want to achieve anyway.

Teachers whose previously high retention and achievement are now in decline appear to share some of the concepts of teachers whose high retention and achievement is being maintained or is still improving. The interviews suggest that something has happened to make them disenchanted and to take on attitudes and behaviours associated with lower achieving teams. This might be a result of sudden changes within the team, perceived changes in management attitudes or a belief that key changes are inherently wrong anyway. When this change is coupled with a long-standing belief that one's good work has never been acknowledged or rewarded, this results in a sense of low self-esteem which then becomes projected into the workplace. Teachers in this category appear to see the learning environment, learning resources and students in a particularly negative light.

These teachers now begin to share some of the same views of students as staff on courses with low retention and achievement. They believe that students are not being recruited with integrity, but assert this is a senior management responsibility and not their own. They also expressed beliefs, more pronounced than in any other category, that such students need more rigorous assessment and stricter deadlines and that if students experienced problems there was no time to deal with them.

Teachers on courses where low retention and achievement were improving began to change their perceptions of themselves and their teams. This sometimes happened because they were encouraged to do so by a new line manager, but usually because teachers recognised there were new strategies available that might make a difference to student retention and achievement.

This change in attitude appears to be associated with a perception that teams can be strong and that teachers can make a difference. Teams appear to become more structured as a result and more emphasis is placed on quality systems, like the observation of teaching and learning, and student feedback.

Teachers in this category still had some negative views about their students, but they began to analyse their student cohorts and tried to understand student lifestyles. Teams in this category begin to recruit with more integrity, focus on student performance and understand why they are not achieving. Caring for students and helping them is seen to get results.

Unwritten contracts and agreements

Over the last 10 years, much work has been undertaken to formalise further education. Both staff and students have written contracts, which attempt to determine working practices in both the college and the classroom. The present research suggests, however, that there are other, invisible contracts made between both teachers and managers and teachers and students. These may, in reality, be much stronger than those which, on paper, appear to be more contractual and binding. In the light of this research, some tentative conclusions can be drawn concerning the nature of such implicit contracts.

So far as teachers on courses with high retention and achievement are concerned, the most important unwritten contracts are made with other teachers in the course team and with students. The contract between team members is to be mutually supportive and dedicate themselves to student success. The contract with students is to provide quality teaching and tutorial support in return for retention and achievement. While an unwritten contract with the team, however, might be long-standing, those with students are subject to continuous ongoing review.

This is not to say that teachers on courses with the highest retention and achievement place no importance on unwritten contracts with college managers. They do – but only if they perceive that managers are reasonably committed to teaching and learning and supportive of both staff development and student success.

Teachers on courses where retention and achievement rates remain low or decline further appear to believe that, as teachers, they have an unwritten contract with college managers. That contract appears to rest on managers' ability to support them in their role and provide a working environment where they can be successful teachers. There is some evidence that such teachers do try to conform to management-led process improvements while grappling with the everyday work of teaching and learning. When management actions subsequently do not respect or support their professional role, but focus instead on a teacher's failure to achieve, the unwritten contract is broken.

When courses with previously high retention and achievement decline, there is some evidence that teachers on these courses have not only lost the professional satisfaction associated with student success, but they are also losing the part of the unwritten contract with managers to the effect that success is not only acknowledged, but might one day be rewarded with promotion. It also seems likely that changes within a long-standing team have not generated a new unwritten contract with team replacements. That said, there are teams which admit to their staleness and the need to review the way they operate.

Teachers on courses where low retention and achievement are improving, appear capable of making a range of unwritten contracts. There is evidence that they will respond to new managers in return for staff development and an acknowledgement that the course is improving. They will also make the same unwritten contracts within the course team and with students as those made by teachers on courses with high retention and achievement.

Improving retention and achievement

This research has focused on teacher perception of a range of change factors likely to have an impact on student retention and achievement. Through interviewing staff teaching on a range of courses, this project has sought to determine what teachers regard as the most significant positive and negative factors accounting for differences between courses which have the highest retention and achievement and those where retention and achievement is declining. The purpose of the research was not to produce a checklist of best practice, but to better understand what ideas and attitudes underpin effective teaching and learning.

The outcomes of the research suggest that all teachers bring to their work specific aptitudes, attitudes and strategies which affect student retention and achievement. More importantly, these aptitudes, attitudes and strategies are quite similar within each category chosen for this study. There are, therefore, some reasonably distinct and predominant patterns of thinking and behaviour on courses with high retention and achievement, on those with low retention and achievement and on those where high retention and achievement is in decline or where low retention and achievement is improving.

While the research also bears out the initial hypotheses, that teachers who are most successful attribute success to their own agency and that those who are not as successful attribute this to factors beyond their control, it would be unwise to assume that one cannot intervene in this behaviour. What is crucial is for college managers and other stakeholders outside colleges to realise that improvement efforts, which do not engage the ways that teachers conceptualise their role and their value systems, are likely to be ineffectual.

For most of the 1990s, successive governments have attached a high priority to improving retention and achievement in colleges. This policy imperative was embodied in funding and inspection frameworks, with colleges that were seen to be under-achieving 'named and shamed'. Colleges have been required to set public and published improvement targets, agreed by their governing bodies, and quite large sums of discretionary funding (in the shape of the Standards Fund) have been allocated to high performing colleges, to disseminate their practice, and to low performing colleges to improve theirs. Improvements in retention and achievement rates are central to the development plans of many colleges, and remain a focus of senior management attention and energy.

Not withstanding all this effort, substantial improvements have proved to be elusive. Retention rates have barely improved over the last 4 years for which data is available (1996–2000). Achievement rates have improved over the same period, but the rate of improvement appears to be slowing down.

The present research offers some insights as to the real difficulties in making sustained improvements in student retention and achievement, and suggests some ways forward. It suggests that improvement efforts which are not focused almost obsessively on students' learning and teachers' teaching and the *interaction* between the two will not be successful. This is in line with a large body of contemporary research on school improvement.

The evidence indicates, however, that this apparently straightforward conclusion is complicated by three interweaving variables:

- teacher concepts of teaching and attitudes towards their role and their students
- the operation of teaching teams
- the existence of implicit or unwritten contracts between teachers and managers.

Staff development, teacher training, qualified teacher status and teaching standards all have a role in the development of the competences and skills of teachers. Neither they, nor any of the other policy levers listed above, appear to have been particularly successful in influencing the behaviours and views of some of the experienced teachers who were interviewed in the course of the present research.

Concepts of teaching are deeply embedded in teachers' values and beliefs and, in large part, reflect those values (Showers, Joyce and Bennett 1987; Borko and Putnam 1995). It is notoriously difficult to change values, but it is possible (Fullan 1992; Wideen 1992; Wasley 1994). To do so, however, requires a fundamental and deep-seated commitment by managers at all levels, to commit to and support such change, and to do so consistently, not least through the ways that they provide models through their own behaviour.

Similar but different conclusions can be drawn concerning teams. Teams have an ambivalent role in this research. Effective, confident and autonomous teams appear to sustain and enthuse teachers on the most successful courses. But, they also appear to support and confirm the belief that there is little or no scope for improvement among teachers on some of the least successful courses. The implication is that improvement strategies that seek to engage teachers will also need to engage the teams and other communities within which teaching is planned and delivered.

These conclusions tend to be reinforced by a further inference: the existence and importance of implicit or unwritten contracts, particularly contracts between teachers and managers. The research indicates that disengagement and a sense of powerlessness is associated with perceptions of a cancellation, or breakdown, of such contracts between teachers and managers.

The implication is that in order to improve retention and achievement, managers will need to renew the implicit or symbolic contracts with their teachers, if they want teachers, in turn, to renew and develop their own partnerships with their students.

Appendix Research methods

The first part of this project was a statistical analysis of questionnaires completed by staff on the following range of courses:

- high baseline, improvement
- high baseline, maintenance
- high baseline, decline
- low baseline, improvement
- low baseline, maintenance
- low baseline, decline.

High baseline means that the course had relatively high retention / achievement rates in 1996/97. Low baseline means the opposite. Improvement means that retention / achievement rates improved over the 3 academic years in the period 1997–2000. Maintenance means that retention / achievement rates stayed the same; decline means they deteriorated.

The questionnaire asked teachers to rate a number of change factors over the three academic years and rate how the changes affected retention and achievement. Teachers were asked to rate the factors on a five-point scale ranging from a large negative impact to a large positive impact.

Statements to be rated were listed under the following categories:

- curriculum
- context of the course / programme
- assessment and feedback
- staffing
- quality systems
- resources
- student cohort
- support for students
- support for teachers
- teaching
- personal tutoring (on this course / programme)
- overall evaluation of the course / programme organisation and administration
- timetabling
- overall evaluation of the changes with the largest impact.

The statistical analysis of the survey responses can be found in the full research report of this project (Martinez and Maynard 2002).

The second, qualitative part of the project, on which the substance of the present report is based, consisted of detailed interviews with 59 staff who completed questionnaires (26% of the overall total), in order to:

- investigate more fully the responses to the survey
- clarify and check some of the tentative conclusions drawn from the survey
- provide the opportunity for teachers to discuss, in a relatively open and unstructured way, their understandings of the factors affecting retention and achievement.

The interviews were carried out in 11 of the 16 participating colleges between November 2000 and January 2002. These were located in five of the nine regions of England and have a variety of local contexts ranging from inner city to urban, and from suburban to small town and rural. Interviews covered a wide range of programmes from Foundation to Level 4. The majority of staff were interviewed individually, but there were two interviews involving two or three members of the same curriculum team.

The interviews were conducted in private and were confidential. Care was taken to explain the interview procedure and not to condition any response. Where necessary, individual responses were subject to further clarification and all interviewees were asked if they would like to comment further on any neutral responses they had made on their original questionnaire. Staff were also reminded to focus on their responses to changes between 1997 and 2000 rather than comment on the current situation within their individual course, college or programme area.

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raising quality
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programme

What do teachers think makes a difference to how their students succeed? This report is based on in depth interviews with over 50 teachers about their courses, students, colleges and teaching practices. Poor student outcomes tend to seen as a result of factors beyond the teacher's control, while teachers on courses where students perform well attribute this to their own agency. As a result of these explorations, suggestions are made as to how improvements can be encouraged.

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